Breaking the Chains of Versailles

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The Treaty of Versailles is sometimes said to have been the beginning of World War II. The Versailles Treaty crushed Germany beneath a burden of shame and reparations, stole vital German territories, and rendered Germany defenseless against enemies from within and without. Britain's David Lloyd George warned the treaty makers at Versailles: "If peace is made under these conditions, it will be the source of a new war." [1]

Unfairness of the Versailles Treaty

In an address to Congress on January 8, 1918, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson set forth his Fourteen Points as a blueprint to peacefully end World War I. The main principles of Wilson's Fourteen Points were a non-vindictive peace, national self-determination, government by the consent of the governed, an end to secret treaties, and an association of nations strong enough to check aggression and keep the peace in the future. Germany decided to end World War I by signing an armistice agreement on November 11, 1918, which bound the Allies to make the final peace treaty conform to Wilson's Fourteen Points.[2]

The Treaty of Versailles presented to German officials, however, was a deliberate violation of the armistice agreement. The Allied representatives at Versailles decided that Germany should lose all of her colonies. All private property of German citizens in German colonies was also forfeited. [3] Even worse, the Treaty of Versailles forced Germany to cede 73,485 square kilometers of her territory in Europe, inhabited by 7,325,000 people, to neighboring states. Germany lost 75% of her production of zinc ore, 74.8% of iron ore, 7.7% of lead ore, 28.7% of coal, and 4% of potash. Of her annual agricultural production, Germany lost 19.7% in potatoes, 18.2% in rye, 17.2% in barley, 12.6% in wheat, and 9.6% in oats. The Saar and other regions to the west of the Rhine were occupied by foreign troops and were to remain occupied for 15 years until a plebiscite was held. Germany had to pay the total costs of 3.64 billion gold marks to fund the Allied occupation of the Saar. [4]

Article 231 of the Treaty of Versailles placed upon Germany the sole responsibility "for causing all the loss and damage to which the Allied and Associated Governments and their nationals have been subjected as a consequence of the war imposed upon them by the aggression of Germany and her allies." This so-called "war-guilt clause" was fundamentally unfair and aroused deep resentment among virtually all Germans. It linked Germany's obligations to pay reparations with a blanket self-condemnation to which almost no German could subscribe.[5]

The Allies under the Versailles Treaty could set reparations at any amount they wanted. In 1920, the Allies set the final bill for reparations at the impossible sum of 269 billion gold marks. The Allied Reparations Committee in 1921 lowered the amount of reparations to 132 billion gold marks, or approximately \$33 billion—still an unrealistic demand. [6]

The Versailles Treaty also forced Germany to disarm almost completely. The treaty abolished the general draft, prohibited all artillery and tanks, allowed a volunteer army of only 100,000 troops and officers, and abolished the air force. The navy was reduced to six capital ships, six light cruisers, 12 destroyers, 12 torpedo boats, 15,000 men and 500 officers. After the delivery of its remaining navy to

the Allies, Germany also had to hand over its merchant ships to the victors with only a few exceptions. All German rivers had to be internationalized and overseas cables ceded to the victors. An international committee oversaw the process of Germany's disarmament until 1927.[7]

Germany eventually signed the Treaty of Versailles on June 28, 1919, because she faced death by starvation and invasion if she refused to sign the treaty. Germany could not feed her people because U.S. warships supported an Allied naval blockade against Germany, and Germany's merchant ships and even Baltic fishing boats were sequestered. Germany's request to buy 2.5 million tons of food was also denied by the Allies. With German families starving, Bolshevik uprisings occurring in several German cities, Trotsky's Red Army driving into Europe, Czechs and Poles ready to strike from the east, and Allied forces prepared to march on Berlin, Germany was forced to sign the treaty. [8]

Despite the unfairness of the Treaty of Versailles, its provisions remained in effect and were formally confirmed by the Kellogg-Briand Peace Pact of 1928. Germans regarded the provisions of the Versailles Treaty as chains of slavery that had to be broken. One German commented in regard to the Versailles Treaty, "The will to break the chains of slavery will be implanted from childhood on." [9] Adolf Hitler referred to the Versailles Treaty in *Mein Kampf* as "...a scandal and a disgrace...the dictate signified an act of highway robbery against our people." [10] Hitler was committed to breaking the chains of Versailles when he came to power in Germany in 1933.

Initial Steps to Break the Chains of Versailles

Hitler's first success in breaking the chains of Versailles was a legal victory in the Saar plebiscite on January 13, 1935. This highly industrialized region had been detached from Germany and placed under the administration of the League of Nations by the Treaty of Versailles. The terms of the Versailles Treaty called for a plebiscite after 15 years with three choices: return to Germany, annexation by France, or continuation of League of Nations rule. [11] In an unquestionably free election, the vote was 477,119 in favor of union with Germany and only 46,613 in favor of the continuance of the existing regime. [12] Despite offering the Saar citizens a number of tax and customs advantages if they decided to become part of France, only 0.40% of voters voted to join France; 8.85% voted for independence of the Saar, and 90.75% voted for union with Germany. [13]

The Saar inhabitants, who voted overwhelmingly to return to Germany were mostly industrial workers—Social Democrats or Roman Catholics. They knew what awaited them in Germany: a dictatorship, the destruction of trade unions, and restrictions on freedom of expression. [14] They knew of the establishment of the Dachau Prison Camp and the execution of scores of SA members in the Röhm purge on June 30, 1934. The German economy in January 1935 was also not substantially better than that of France or other countries in Europe. The Saar election was evidence that the appeal of German nationalism was powerful.

Hitler began an assault on the Versailles provisions with the creation of a German air force on March 9, 1935. On March 16, 1935, Hitler announced the restoration of compulsory military service. Germany regarded the army of the Soviet Union at 960,000 men as excessively large, and France had recently increased the terms of service in her armies. Hitler wanted to increase German military strength to 550,000 troops because of this Franco-Russian threat. [15]

Germany continued to modify the Versailles provisions by signing the Anglo-German Naval Agreement on June 18, 1935. This treaty fixed the size of the German fleet at 35% of the total tonnage of the British Commonwealth of Nations. Germany could also build a submarine force equal to that of Great Britain. Hitler was elated with this agreement. Hitler had dreamed of an Anglo-German alliance ever since he had fought Britain in World War I. Britain's naval treaty with Germany also effectively undermined the Stresa Front that Britain had established with France and Italy earlier in 1935.[16]

Germany was forbidden under the Treaty of Versailles to build fortifications or maintain troops in a wide demilitarized zone along its western frontier. This arrangement made the vital Ruhr and Rhineland industrial areas vulnerable to a swift attack from France. The Treaty of Locarno, of which Britain and Italy were co-guarantors, also endorsed the demilitarization of the Rhineland. Hitler challenged this limitation when he sent troops into the Rhineland on March 7, 1936. Although this was a major gamble by Hitler, France was unwilling to challenge Hitler without British support. Britain was unwilling to authorize anything resembling war because there was a general feeling in Britain that Germany was only asserting a right of sovereignty within her own borders. [17]

Germany was now able to protect her western borders by constructing the Siegfried Line. Lloyd George, the former prime minister of Great Britain, commended Hitler in the House of Commons for having reoccupied the Rhineland to protect his country:

France had built the most gigantic fortifications ever seen in any land, where, almost a hundred feet underground you can keep an army of over 100,000 and where you have guns that can fire straight into Germany. Yet the Germans are supposed to remain without even a garrison, without a trench...If Herr Hitler had allowed that to go on without protecting his country, he would have been a traitor to the Fatherland. [18]

On later meeting Hitler, Lloyd George was "spellbound by Hitler's astonishing personality and manner" and referred to Hitler as "indeed a great man. Führer is the proper name for him, for he is a born leader—yes, a statesman."[19]

Other British statesmen were also impressed with Hitler. In a book published in 1937, Winston Churchill expressed his "admiration for the courage, the perseverance, and the vital force which enabled [Hitler] to challenge, defy, conciliate, or overcome, all the authorities or resistances which barred his path." [20] Hitler and his Nazis had shown "their patriotic ardor and love of country." [21]

Churchill also wrote: "Those who have met Herr Hitler face to face have found a highly competent, cool, well-informed functionary with an agreeable manner, a disarming smile, and few have been unaffected by a subtle personal magnetism. Nor is this impression merely the dazzle of power. He exerted it on his companions at every stage in his struggle, even when his fortunes were in the lowest depths." [22]

By March 1936 Germany had taken important steps in overcoming the provisions of the Versailles Treaty. Hitler made no more moves in Europe for the next two years. Until 1938, Hitler's foreign policy moves had been bold but not reckless. From the point of view of the Western Powers, his methods constituted unconventional diplomacy whose aims were recognizably in accord with traditional German nationalist clamor. [23]

The Anschluss

The victors at the Paris Peace Conference had wanted to divide rather than unify Austria and Germany. Austria had asked Allied permission at the Paris Peace Conference to enter into a free-trade zone with Germany. Austria's request was denied. As far back as April and May of 1921, plebiscites on a union with Germany were held in Austria in the Tyrol and at Salzburg. The votes in the Tyrol were over 140,000 for the *Anschluss* and only 1,794 against. In Salzburg, more than 100,000 voted for union with Germany and only 800 against. [24] Despite the overwhelming desire of Austrians to join with Germany, the Treaty of St. Germain signed by Austria after World War I prevented the union.

Under the treaties of Versailles and St. Germain, Germany and Austria could not even enter into a customs union without permission from the League of Nations. In 1931, hard-hit by the Great Depression, Germany asked again for permission to form an Austro-German customs union. The League of Nations denied Germany's request. Germany later requested an end to its obligation to pay war reparations under Versailles because of Germany's economic crisis caused by the Great Depression. Germany's request was again refused. Many historians believe the resulting economic distress contributed to the rapid rise of National Socialists to power in Germany. [25] The Allied refusals also frustrated the desire of German and Austrian nationalists to exercise their right of self-determination.

Edward Frederick Lindley Wood (Lord Halifax) gave Hitler encouragement to peacefully incorporate Austria into Germany at Berchtesgaden on November 19, 1937. Lord Halifax brought up the important questions of Danzig, Austria and Czechoslovakia on his own initiative without any prompting from Hitler. Halifax told Hitler that Great Britain realized that the Paris Treaties of 1919 contained mistakes that had to be rectified. [26] Halifax stated that Britain would not go to war to prevent an *Anschluss* with Austria, a transfer of the Sudetenland to Germany, or a return of Danzig to the Reich. Britain might even be willing to serve as an honest broker in effecting the return of what rightfully belonged to Germany, if this was all done in a gentlemanly fashion. [27]

British historian A. J. P. Taylor wrote:

This was exactly what Hitler wanted... Halifax's remarks, if they had any practical sense, were an invitation to Hitler to promote German nationalist agitation in Danzig, Czechoslovakia, and Austria; an assurance also that his agitation would not be opposed from without. Nor did these promptings come from Halifax alone. In London, Eden told Ribbentrop: "People in Europe recognized that a closer connection between Germany and Austria would have to come about sometime." The same news came from France. Papen, on a visit to Paris, "was amazed to note" that Chautemps, the premier, and Bonnet, then finance minister, "considered a reorientation of French policy in Central Europe as entirely open to discussion..." They had "no objection to a marked extension of German influence in Austria obtained through evolutionary means"; nor in Czechoslovakia "on the basis of a reorganization into a nation of nationalities." [28]

Lord Halifax's message to Hitler underscores a crucial point in the history of this era: Hitler's agenda was no surprise to European diplomats. Any German nationalist would demand adjustments to the frontiers laid down at Versailles. With Great Britain's approval of the peaceful annexation of Austria into Germany, the problem was how to get the Austrians to peacefully agree to unification with Germany. Austrian Chancellor Kurt von Schuschnigg would soon force the issue. [29]

Since the summer of 1934, Austria had been governed by a conservative dictatorship headed by Dr. Kurt von Schuschnigg. Schuschnigg persecuted Austrians who favored unification with Germany. Political dissidents landed in concentration camps, and the regime denied persons of "deficient civic reliability" the right to practice their occupation.[30]

In January 1938, Austrian police discovered plans of some Austrian National Socialists to overthrow Schuschnigg in violation of a "Gentlemen's Agreement" entered into with Germany on July 11, 1936. Schuschnigg met with Hitler at Berchtesgaden on February 12, 1938, complaining of the attempted overthrow of his government by Austrian National Socialists. Hitler and Schuschnigg reached an agreement that day, but Schuschnigg claimed that Hitler had been violent in manner during the first two hours of conversation. [31] Some accounts of their meeting say that Schuschnigg was bullied by Hitler and subjected to a long list of indignities. [32]

Schuschnigg began to consider means of repudiating the agreement made with Hitler in their meeting of February 12, 1938. Schuschnigg's solution was to hold a rigged plebiscite. On March 9, 1938, Schuschnigg announced that a plebiscite would be held four days later on March 13, 1938, to decide, finally and forever, whether Austria was to remain an independent nation.

The planned plebiscite was completely unfair. There was only one question, which asked the voter, "Are you for a free and German, independent and social, Christian and united Austria, for peace and work, for the equality of all those who affirm themselves for the people and the Fatherland?" There were no voting lists; only *yes* ballots were to be provided by the government; anyone wishing to vote *no* had to provide their own ballot, the same size as the *yes* ballots, with nothing on it but the word *no*.[33] During preparations for the election, the government press in Austria announced that anyone voting "no" would be guilty of treason.[34]

The Austrian government took additional steps to ensure that the vote would swing in their direction. The qualification age to vote was raised to 24, making it impossible for young National Socialists to register their views. Schuschnigg and his men also distributed a huge number of flyers, scattering some by aircraft in Austria's most-remote and -snowbound corners. Trucks drove around the country transmitting the message of Austrian independence by loudspeaker. Everywhere the "German" theme was driven home: Being Austrian was being a good German; being "German" was to be free [of National-Socialist Germany]. Austrians were better "Germans" than the National Socialists.[35]

Hitler was alarmed by Schuschnigg's proposed plebiscite. Hitler had hoped for an evolutionary strategy in Austria that would gradually merge Austria into the Reich. However, Hitler felt humiliated and betrayed by Schuschnigg, and he could not let the phony plebiscite proceed. After receiving word on March 11, 1938 that Mussolini accepted the *Anschluss*, Hitler decided to march into Austria with his troops on March 12, 1938. Hitler was greeted with a joyously enthusiastic reception from the masses of the Austrian people. [36] Not a shot was fired by Hitler's army.

Hitler was aware of the bad publicity abroad such an apparent act of force would generate. He had hoped to assimilate Austria in an obviously legal manner. However, Schuschnigg and his entire cabinet had resigned from office after Britain, France and Italy all denounced the phony plebiscite. Hitler feared that Austrian Marxists might take advantage of Austria's momentary political vacuum and stage an uprising. Göring also warned of the possibility that Austria's neighbors might exploit its temporary

weakness by occupying Austrian territory. Hitler decided to militarily occupy Austria to prevent either of these possibilities from occurring.[37]

On April 10, 1938, joint plebiscites were held in Germany and Austria to approve the *Anschluss*. All Germans and Austrians over the age of 20 were eligible to vote, with the exception of Jews and criminals. The result of the plebiscites was 99.08% of the people in Germany were in favor of the *Anschluss*, while 99.73% of Austrians were for the *Anschluss*.[38] The plebiscites might have been manipulated to some extent as shown by the near-unanimous assent from the Dachau Prison Camp. Also, the ballot was not anonymous since the voter's name and address were printed on the back of each ballot. However, there is no question that the vast majority of people in Germany and Austria approved the *Anschluss*. Hitler's aims had struck a chord with national German aspirations, and the plebiscite reflected Hitler's popularity with the German people.[39]

The invasion of Austria had hurt Germany's public image. British historian A.J.P. Taylor wrote:

Hitler had won. He had achieved the first object of his ambition. Yet not in the way that he had intended. He had planned to absorb Austria imperceptibly, so that no one could tell when it had ceased to be independent; he would use democratic methods to destroy Austrian independence as he had done to destroy German democracy. Instead he had been driven to call in the German army. For the first time, he lost the asset of aggrieved morality and appeared as a conqueror, relying on force. The belief soon became established that Hitler's seizure of Austria was a deliberate plot, devised long in advance, and the first step towards the domination of Europe. This belief was a myth. The crisis of March 1938 was provoked by Schuschnigg, not by Hitler. There had been no German preparations, military or diplomatic. Everything was improvised in a couple of days—policy, promises, armed force...But the effects could not be undone...The uneasy balance tilted, though only slightly, away from peace and towards war. Hitler's aims might still appear justifiable; his methods were condemned. By the Anschluss—or rather by the way in which it was accomplished—Hitler took the first step in the policy which was to brand him as the greatest of war criminals. Yet he took this step unintentionally. Indeed, he did not know that he had taken it.[40]

Winston Churchill made the following statement in the House of Commons shortly after the Anschluss:

The public mind has been concentrated upon the moral and sentimental aspects of the Nazi conquest of Austria—a small country brutally struck down, its Government scattered to the winds, the oppression of the Nazi party doctrine imposed upon a Catholic population and upon the working-classes of Austria and Vienna, the hard ill-usage of persecution which indeed will ensue—which is probably in progress at the moment—of those who, this time last week, were exercising their undoubted political rights, discharging their duties to their own country....[41]

Churchill's statement is a lie. The overwhelming majority of Austrians had desired a union with Germany. The *Anschluss* was hugely popular in Austria. Churchill in his speech had begun the warmongering that led to World War II.

The Czechoslovakia Crisis

At the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, 3.25 million German inhabitants of Bohemia and Moravia were transferred to the new Czechoslovakia in a flagrant disregard of Woodrow Wilson's ideal of self-determination. The new Czechoslovakia was a multiethnic, multilingual, Catholic-Protestant

conglomerate that had never existed before as a sovereign nation. From 1920 to 1938, repeated petitions had been sent to the League of Nations by the repressed minorities of Czechoslovakia. By 1938, the Sudeten Germans were eager to be rid of Czech rule and become part of Germany. In a fair plebiscite, a minimum of 80% of Sudeten Germans would have voted for the territories they lived in to become part of the new Reich. [42]

It was clear to Czech leaders that the excitement among the Sudeten Germans after the *Anschluss* would soon force the resolution of the Sudeten question. The Czech cabinet and military leaders decided on May 20, 1938 to order a partial mobilization of the Czech armed forces. This partial mobilization was based on the false accusation that German troops were concentrating on the Czech frontiers. Czech leaders hoped that the resulting confusion would commit the British and French to support the Czech position before a policy favoring concessions to the Sudeten Germans could be implemented. Although the plot failed, Czech leaders granted interviews in which they claimed that Czechoslovakia had scored a great victory over Germany. An international press campaign representing that Czechoslovakia had forced Hitler to back down from his planned aggression reverberated around the world.[43]

British Ambassador to Germany Nevile Henderson believed that the Czech mobilization of its army, and the ridicule heaped upon Hitler by the world press, led directly to the Munich Agreement:

The defiant gesture of the Czechs in mobilizing some 170,000 troops and then proclaiming to the world that it was their action which had turned Hitler away from his purpose was... regrettable. But what Hitler could not stomach was the exultation of the press...Every newspaper in America and Europe joined in the chorus. "No" had been said and Hitler had been forced to yield. The democratic powers had brought the totalitarian states to heel, etc.

It was, above all, this jubilation which gave Hitler the excuse for his...worst brain storm of the year, and pushed him definitely over the border line from peaceful negotiation to the use of force. From May 23rd to May 28th his fit of sulks and fury lasted, and on the later date he gave orders for a gradual mobilization of the Army, which should be prepared for all eventualities in the autumn. [44]

By the 1930s, the majority of the British people believed that Germany had been wronged at Versailles. The British people now broadly supported the appeasement of Germany in regaining her lost territories. If appeasement meant granting self-determination to the Sudetenland Germans, the British people approved.[45]

Lord Halifax informed French leaders on July 20, 1938 that a special fact-finding mission under Lord Runciman would be sent to Czechoslovakia. President Beneš of Czechoslovakia was disturbed by this news. It was a definite indication that the British might adopt a compromising policy toward Germany in the crisis. The British mission completed its study in September 1938, and it reported that the main difficulty in the Sudeten area had been the disinclination of the Czechs to grant reforms. This British report was accompanied by the final rupture of negotiations between the Sudeten Germans and the Czech leaders. The Czech crisis was coming to a climax. [46]

British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain flew to Hitler's mountain retreat at Berchtesgaden to discuss the Czech problem directly with Hitler. At their meeting Hitler consented to refrain from military action while Chamberlain would discuss with his cabinet the means of applying the principle of self-

determination to the Sudeten Germans. The result was a decision to transfer to Germany areas in which the Sudeten Germans constituted more than 50% of the population. President Beneš of Czechoslovakia reluctantly accepted this proposal. [47]

A problem developed in the negotiations when Chamberlain met with Hitler a second time. Hitler insisted on an immediate German military occupation of regions where the Sudeten Germans were more than half of the population. Hitler also insisted that the claims of the Polish and Hungarian minorities be satisfied before participating in the proposed international guarantee of the new Czechoslovakian frontier. Several days of extreme tension followed. Chamberlain announced on September 28, 1938 to the House of Commons that Hitler had invited him, together with Daladier and Mussolini, to a conference in Munich the following afternoon. The House erupted in an outburst of tremendous enthusiasm.[48]

The parties signed the Munich Agreement in the early hours of September 30, 1938. Hitler got substantially everything he wanted. The territories populated by the Sudeten Germans had become a part of Germany. Chamberlain and Hitler signed a joint declaration that the Munich Agreement and the Anglo-German naval accord symbolized "the desire of our two peoples never to go to war with each other again." Chamberlain told the cheering crowd in London that welcomed him home, "I believe it is peace in our time." [49] War had been averted in Europe. The chains of Versailles had been completely broken.

British Warmongering

The British war enthusiasts lost no time in launching their effort to spoil the celebration of the Munich Agreement. On October 1, 1938, First Lord of the Admiralty Alfred Duff Cooper announced that he was resigning from the British cabinet. In a speech delivered on October 3, 1938, Duff Cooper criticized the British government for not assuming a definite commitment during the Czech crisis. He asserted that Great Britain would not have been fighting for the Czechs, but rather for the balance of power, which was precious to many British hearts. Duff Cooper believed that it was his mission and that of his country to prevent Germany from achieving a dominant position on the Continent. [50]

Clement Attlee, the new Labor Party leader, spoke of the Munich Agreement as a huge victory for Hitler and an "annihilating defeat for democracy." Attlee in his speech included the Soviet Union as a democracy. Anthony Eden gave a speech in which he criticized Chamberlain on detailed points, and expressed doubt that Britain would fulfill her promised guarantee to the Czech state. Eden advised the House to regard the current situation as a mere pause before the next crisis. He claimed that the British armaments campaign was proceeding too slowly.[51]

In his speech on October 5, 1938, Winston Churchill stated that Hitler had extracted British concessions at pistol point, and he loved to use the image of Hitler as a gangster. Churchill used flowery rhetoric and elegant phrases to describe the allegedly mournful Czechs slipping away into darkness. Churchill wanted to convince his countrymen that National-Socialist Germany was seized of an insatiable desire for world conquest. The simple and stark purpose of Churchill's speech was to convince the British people to eventually accept a war of annihilation against Germany. Churchill was a useful instrument in building up British prejudice against Germany. [52]

The debate on the Munich Agreement surpassed all other parliamentary debates on British foreign policy since World War I. Other Conservatives who refused to accept the Munich Agreement included Harold Macmillan, Duncan Sandys, Leopold Amery, Harold Nicolson, Roger Keyes, Sidney Herbert, and Gen. Edward Spears. These men were joined by a score of lesser figures in the House of Commons, and they were supported by such prominent people as Lord Cranborne and Lord Wolmer in the House of Lords. Chamberlain won the vote of confidence, but he did not possess the confidence of the British Conservative Party. [53]

The warmongering that led to World War II was increasing in Great Britain. Hitler was dismayed at the steady stream of hate propaganda directed at Germany. In a speech given in Saarbrücken on October 9, 1938, Hitler said: "...All it would take would be for Mr. Duff Cooper or Mr. Eden or Mr. Churchill to come to power in England instead of Chamberlain, and we know very well that it would be the goal of these men to immediately start a new world war. They do not even try to disguise their intents; they state them openly." [54]

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